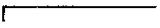


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The Secular Scripture

A Study of the
Structure of Romance

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The Word
and World of Man

THIS BOOK is concerned with some principles of storytelling. The discussion revolves around fiction, and especially around what I am going to call naive and sentimental romance, using two critical terms derived from Schiller's essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*. I am not using these words precisely as Schiller uses them—I could not bring myself to call Goethe a naive poet, as he does—but they are not used in quite their ordinary English senses either. By naive romance I mean the kind of story that is found in collections of folk tales and *märchen*, like Grimms' Fairy Tales. By sentimental romance I mean a more extended and literary development of the formulas of naive romance. Most of this, in early and modern times, has been in prose narrative.

Sentimental romance begins, for my purposes, in the late Classical period. There is Greek romance in Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius, Longus, Xenophon of Ephesus, and others. There is Latin romance in Apuleius and (probably) the Apollonius story, used twice by Shakespeare. And there is early Christian romance in the Clementine Recognitions, in the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, and the more legendary lives of the saints. This literature covers a period of many centuries, and none of it except Apuleius'

Golden Ass is generally familiar, but I have to refer to it occasionally because it shows the stock themes and images of romance with special clarity, as early works in a genre so often do.

Medieval romance presents different structural problems, which I shall have to touch very lightly. But in sixteenth-century England, with Sidney's *Arcadia* and similar works, the late Classical conventions reappear. When the novel developed, romance continued along with it in the "Gothic" stories of "Monk" Lewis and his Victorian successors. William Morris is to me the most interesting figure in this tradition for many reasons, one of them being his encyclopedic approach to romance, his ambition to collect every major story in literature and retell or translate it. In the twentieth century romance got a new lease of fashion after the mid-fifties, with the success of Tolkien and the rise of what is generally called science fiction.

No genre stands alone, and in dealing with romance I have to allude to every other aspect of literature as well. Still, the conventions of prose romance show little change over the course of centuries, and conservatism of this kind is the mark of a stable genre. In the Greek romances we find stories of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies about the future contortions of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage with the heroine. We open, let us say, *Guy Mannering*, written fifteen centuries later, and we find that, although there are slight changes in the setting, the kind of story being told, a story of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies, capture by pirates, and the like, is very much the same. In Greek romance the characters are Levantine, the setting is the Mediterranean world, and the normal means of transportation is by shipwreck.

In science fiction the characters may be earthlings, the setting the intergalactic spaces, and what gets wrecked in hostile territory a spaceship, but the tactics of the storyteller generally conform to much the same outlines.

One of the roots from which these chapters grew was an abandoned essay on the Waverley novels of Scott. The home I was brought up in possessed a good edition of the Waverley novels, and I had, I think, read them all in early life, with utter fascination. Some years later, at college, *Guy Mannering* was on a course and I reread it, but I had entered the age of intolerance by then, and *Guy Mannering* now seemed to me only a clumsy and faked narrative with wooden characters and an abominable style. I read Scott as little as possible through my earlier professional life, but about twenty years ago I was talking to a late friend whose name it is a pleasure to mention here, Richard Blackmur, about the amount of tedium in modern life caused by plane journeys and waiting in airports. He remarked that he had got through a long and exhausting trip himself with the aid of Scott. "I love Scott," he said. I tried the recipe. Richard was right, as he so often was: when one is traveling by jet plane it is deeply reassuring to have a stagecoach style for a traveling companion.

By this time I was ready to become fascinated once more by Scott's formulaic techniques. The same building blocks appeared every time: light and dark heroines, outlawed or secret societies, wild women chanting prophecies, heroes of mysterious and ultimately fortunate birth; but the variety with which they were disposed was what now impressed me. I noticed that much of the criticism of Scott attempted to assimilate him to standards that were not his. It was said that his characterization was what was important and that his plots were of secondary interest: this is nonsense, of course, but was said about him because it is

believed to be true of more fashionable writers. After I began to glimpse something of the uniformity of romance formulas over the centuries, I understood that my interest in Scott belonged in a larger context.

Meanwhile, an early absorption in Blake had expanded in two directions. One direction took me into the Bible by way of Milton: this is to be explored in another book. The other direction was one that connected Blake with two other writers in particular, Spenser and William Morris, both writers of sentimental romance. So Spenser, Scott, and Morris appeared as three major centers of romance in a continuous tradition, and, these once identified, other centers, like the tales of Chaucer and the late comedies of Shakespeare, soon fell into place. This left me with a sense of a double tradition, one biblical and the other romantic, growing out of an interest in Blake which seemed to have contained them both. The title of this book, *The Secular Scripture*, suggests something of its relation to a study of the Bible. The distinction underlying this relation is our first step.

Every human society, we may assume, has some form of verbal culture, in which fictions, or stories, have a prominent place. Some of these stories may seem more important than others: they illustrate what primarily concerns their society. They help to explain certain features in that society's religion, laws, social structure, environment, history, or cosmology. Other stories seem to be less important, and of some at least of these stories we say that they are told to entertain or amuse. This means that they are told to meet the imaginative needs of the community, so far as structures in words can meet those needs. The more important stories are also imaginative, but incidentally so: they are intended to convey something more like special knowledge, something of what in religion is called revela-

tion. Hence they are not thought of as imaginative or even of human origin, for a long time.

The more important group of stories in the middle of a society's verbal culture I shall call myths, using that word in a rather specific way which would not apply without modification outside the present argument. The more peripheral group, regarded by its own society, if not necessarily by us, as less important, I shall connect chiefly with the word folktale, though other words, such as legend, also belong to it. It is difficult to make an adjective out of the word folktale, so I shall speak of my two types of verbal experience as the mythical and the fabulous.

In European literature, down to the last couple of centuries, the myths of the Bible have formed a special category, as a body of stories with a distinctive authority. Poets who attach themselves to this central mythical area, like Dante or Milton, have been thought of as possessing a special kind of seriousness conferred on them by their subject matter. Such poems were recognized, in their own day, to be what we should now call imaginative productions; but their content was assumed to be real, if at one remove, and not only real but about what most deeply concerned their readers.

When we turn to the tales of Chaucer or the comedies of Shakespeare, the primary motive of the author seems to be entertainment, in the sense of the word just used. Here we notice an influence from folktale, so pervasive as to make it clear that folktale is their direct literary ancestor. There are hardly any comedies of Shakespeare, and few tales told on the Canterbury pilgrimage, that do not have some common folktale theme prominently featured in them. In Greek literature, the central mythical area is provided mainly by the Homeric epics and the tragic poets. The comic writers are allowed to be more inventive, and tell

stories that have no connection with the Greek equivalent of revelation, though, as in *The Birds* and *The Frogs*, they often parody it. Again we notice, as we go from New Comedy to the later prose romances, an increasingly close connection with folktales.

Most myths are stories about or concerning the gods, and so the distinction between the mythical and the fabulous overlaps a good deal with the distinction between the sacred and the secular. But it is not identical with it, since many stories may be mythical, in the present sense, without being sacred. The largest and most important group of these are the national stories, which as a rule shade insensibly from the legendary to the historical. "In addition to the Bible," says George MacDonald, "each nation possesses a Bible . . . in its history." Thus the legends of the dynasties of Argos and Thebes were mythical for the Greeks in our sense, but were not strictly sacred even in the Greek sense. In Western literature, the overlapping of mythical and sacred is much closer, but even there national history has a particular seriousness. The alternative title of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, "All Is True," perhaps indicates a seriousness of this kind, and one that the audience would not have expected from *The Tempest*, even though *The Tempest* has held the stage so much better.

The difference between the mythical and the fabulous is a difference in authority and social function, not in structure. If we were concerned only with structural features we should hardly be able to distinguish them at all. Most of the stories about the accepted divine beings are myths rather than folktales, but structurally this distinction is more one of content than of actual shape. The parallelism in structure between myth and folktale meets us everywhere in literature: an example is the exposed-infant theme of Greek New Comedy, which is not necessarily "derived"

from myth but is obviously similar to some myths. There are only so many effective ways of telling a story, and myths and folktales share them without dividing them.

But as a distinctive tendency in the social development of literature, myths have two characteristics that folktales, at least in their earlier stages, do not show, or show much less clearly. First, myths stick together to form a mythology, a large interconnected body of narrative that covers all the religious and historical revelation that its society is concerned with, or concerned about. Second, as part of this sticking-together process, myths take root in a specific culture, and it is one of their functions to tell that culture what it is and how it came to be, in their own mythical terms. Thus they transmit a legacy of shared allusion to that culture. Folktales by themselves, at least at first, lead a more nomadic existence. They travel over the world through all the barriers of language; they do not expand into larger structures, but interchange their themes and motifs at random, like the principles of chaos in Milton. But as literature develops, "secular" stories also begin to take root in the culture and contribute to the shared heritage of allusion.

The mythical poet, then, has his material handed him by tradition, whereas the fabulous poet may, up to a point, choose his own plots and characters. Aristophanes produced a distinctive "gimmick" for each of his comedies, and was expected to do so; Sophocles was expected to tell the mythical stories that had been made relevant to the Dionysus cult. Otherwise, the audience could ask, and feel that it had a right to ask, "What has all this to do with Dionysus?" The characters and plots of mythical poets have the resonance of social acceptance about them, and they carry an authority that no writer can command who is merely being what we call "creative." The transmission of tra-

dition is explicit and conscious for the mythical writer and his audience: the fabulous writer may seem to be making up his stories out of his own head, but this never happens in literature, even if the illusion of its happening is a necessary illusion for some writers. His material comes from traditions behind him which may have no recognized or understood social status, and may not be consciously known to the writer or to his public.

The fact that myths stick together to form a mythology is clearly shown in an explicitly Christian story, such as the Barlaam and Josaphat romance, which comes from about the eighth century. This is said to be a Christianized version of the story of the Buddha, though there is hardly enough story for many specific parallels to emerge. Prince Josaphat is kept in seclusion by his father, who hates Christianity: the hermit Barlaam gets through to see him on the pretext that he has a precious jewel to show him. The jewel turns out to be an interminable sermon in which Barlaam sets forth the entire structure of Christian mythology from creation to last judgment, with appendices on the ascetic life, the use of images in ritual, the necessity of baptism, and the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. What makes so long a harangue possible—its plausibility is another matter—is simply the interconnection of the individual myths in the total Christian mythology: every concept or doctrine involves all the others. This was similarly the reason for the proverbial length of Puritan sermons, many centuries later. Such sermons were not necessarily digressive or shapeless, but, as in other forms of oral literature, there were certain mnemonic hooks or couplets leading from one point to the next until everything that God had in his mind for man had been expounded.

According to the Venerable Bede, this was how English literature got started with Caedmon. When the harp was

passed around at a feast and guests were expected to take their turns chanting or improvising poetry, Caedmon had to retire to the stable in humiliation. On one such occasion an angel appeared before him and commanded him to sing. The theme suggested to him was the creation, that is, page one of the Bible. Once started on that, there was no stopping Caedmon until he had sung his way through the entire mythological corpus:

He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole story of Genesis. He sang of Israel's departure from Egypt, their entry into the land of promise, and many other events of scriptural history. He sang of the Lord's incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension into heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the teaching of the apostles. He also made many poems on the terrors of the last judgement, the horrible pains of hell, and the joys of the kingdom of heaven. In addition to these, he composed several others on the blessings and judgements of God, by which he sought to turn his hearers from delight in wickedness and to inspire them to love and do good.

Caedmon was thus doing what the medieval miracle plays were later to do, in huge cyclical sequences that took several days to get through.

But while the difference in social function between myth and fable makes for these differences in characteristics, the identity in structure pulls in the opposite direction. Secular literature, even in the oral stage, also builds up an interconnecting body of stories. Thus *Beowulf*, which is close in its conventions to oral literature, refers parenthetically to other stories about Siegmund, Offa, and Ingeld; and most of the Icelandic Sagas contain allusions or cross-references to other Sagas. Given a slightly different direction

of social development, such a body of legend might easily have become mythical in our present sense of the term. Myths stick together because of cultural forces impelling them to do so: these forces are not primarily literary, and mythologies are mainly accepted as structures of belief or social concern rather than imagination. But it is the structure of myths that makes the process possible, and since folktales possess the same kind of structure they can stick together too.

In secular literature, before copyright laws and individual claims to stories are set up, a standard relating to completeness in telling traditional stories seems often to be implied. Others have told this story before, the author gives us to understand, but I'm going to tell it better and more fully, so you won't have to refer to anyone else for missing features. In certain social contexts, such completeness might well become a qualification for passing over from the fabulous to the mythical category, as doubtless happened with the two Homeric poems. The standard of completeness shows the encyclopedic tendency of myth at work in what we are now calling folktale or fable.

The *Beowulf* poet alludes to the story of Offa to identify a contrasting pattern of story: Hygd, the good queen the poet is talking about, reminds him by contrast of Thryth the wife of Offa, who was a bad one. Similarly, an eighteenth-century novelist will tell an inset tale, like the story of the Man on the Hill in *Tom Jones*, which has a narrative movement opposite to that of the main story. The effect of such an inset tale is to establish the main story as one of a category of stories, giving it a broader significance than it would have as an isolated story. As a body of myths expands, it absorbs other stories, especially the stories connected with specific local places and people that are called legends. Thus the great Hebraic myths of the crea-

tion, deluge, and exodus expanded to include the legends of the Judges and the prophets Elijah and Elisha. A later process of expansion took in the folktales of Jonah, Ruth, Tobit, Esther, Judith, and Susanna. Christian mythology similarly expanded to include a large body of romance, including many saints' lives and such apocryphal stories as the Harrowing of Hell. Such an absorption of legend marks the political and social ascendancy of a society with a central mythology, as it takes over other areas, and this mythical imperialism is possible because of the structural similarities among all forms of story.

The literature of a polytheistic mythology can emphasize certain cults or even absorb or promote new ones, just as Christianity could use legend to enhance the prestige of a specific saint or shrine. Some of the Greek romancers say that they intend their stories to be an offering to Eros, or a demonstration of that god's power. The conclusion to *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius was evidently among other things a plug for the cult of Isis. The same structural principle may still be used where there is no longer any question of cult. Greene's story *Pandosto*, the main source of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, treats Apollo's oracle at Delphi in a way which would tempt us to assume, if it had been written two thousand years earlier, that it was trying to promote the prestige of that oracle. We are touching here on the relation of imaginative structures to belief or worship: the general principle is that imaginative structures as such are independent of belief, and it makes no difference to the structure whether the implied beliefs are real, pretended, or denounced as demonic, like the religion of the Trojans in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Just as a mythology may absorb new legendary material, so it may itself cease to carry the sense of superior importance or authority. This happens whenever one cul-

ture supersedes another. Classical mythology became fabulous, a branch of secular literature, in Christian times, and biblical mythology, as such, is rapidly becoming fabulous now. Very ancient Near Eastern stories of the creation as the killing of a dragon whose body supplied the material for it, originally mythical, have become fabulous in the Old Testament. Such a use of them, naturally, does not destroy their structural outlines. Similarly, Classical mythology still could, long after it had become fable, be used as a counterpoint to Christian mythology.

The Bible is the supreme example of the way that myths can, under certain social pressures, stick together to make up a mythology. A second look at this mythology shows us that it actually became, for medieval and later centuries, a vast mythological universe, stretching in time from creation to apocalypse, and in metaphorical space from heaven to hell. A mythological universe is a vision of reality in terms of human concerns and hopes and anxieties: it is not a primitive form of science. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, man first acquires a mythological universe and then pretends as long as he can that it is also the actual universe. All mythological universes are by definition centered on man, therefore the actual universe was also assumed to be centered on man. Some Greek thinkers had realized that the earth went around the sun, but the medieval world ignored them because the geocentric model was more reassuring, at least from the point of view of those who controlled the culture.

The secession of science from the mythological universe is a familiar story. The separating of scientific and mythological space began theoretically with Copernicus, and effectively with Galileo. By the nineteenth century scientific time had been emancipated from mythological time. But in proportion as the mythological universe becomes

more obviously a construct, another question arises. We saw that there is no structural principle to prevent the fables of secular literature from also forming a mythology, or even a mythological universe. Is it possible, then, to look at secular stories as a whole, and as forming a single integrated vision of the world, parallel to the Christian and biblical vision? This is the question implied in the "secular scripture" of my title. In the chapters that follow I should like to look at fiction as a total verbal order, with the outlines of an imaginative universe also in it. The Bible is the epic of the creator, with God as its hero. Romance is the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man's vision of his own life as a quest.

One of my predecessors in the Norton Lectures, J. L. Borges, says, in a little story called "The Gospel According to Mark": "generations of men, throughout recorded time, have always told and retold two stories—that of a lost ship which searches the Mediterranean seas for a dearly loved island, and that of a god who is crucified on Golgotha." The Crucifixion is an episode in the biblical epic: Borges is clearly suggesting that romance, as a whole, provides a parallel epic in which the themes of shipwreck, pirates, enchanted islands, magic, recognition, the loss and regaining of identity, occur constantly, as they do in the last four romances of Shakespeare. Borges is referring to different episodes of the two complete stories, but he puts his finger on an essential structural problem of criticism.

We notice that mythical poets, including Dante and Milton, do not themselves acquire the authority of the myths they treat, unless by accident, or unless, like Homer, they come at the very beginning of a cultural development. The

Devil in Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* remarks contemptuously of *Paradise Lost* that to this day every Englishman believes that the whole of Milton's "silly story" is in the Bible. But it is clear that the belief is founded on a cultural misunderstanding, "Englishmen" being more ignorant of what is in the Bible than the Devil can afford to be. If one actually does know the Bible or the teachings of a religion based on it, he has probably not derived his knowledge from the poets. The distinction of mythical and fabulous, in other words, overlaps not only with the distinction of sacred and secular, but with the distinction of true and false, or of what is believed to be true or false.

Myths are usually assumed to be true, stories about what really happened. But truth is not the central basis for distinguishing the mythical from the fabulous: it is a certain quality of importance or authority for the community that marks the myth, not truth as such. The anxiety of society, when it urges the authority of a myth and the necessity of believing it, seems to be less to proclaim its truth than to prevent anyone from questioning it. It aims at consent, including the consent of silence, rather than conviction. Thus the Christian myth of providence, after a battle, is often invoked by the winning side in a way which makes its truth of secondary importance. The storm that wrecked the Spanish Armada was a providential event to the English, but a natural event to the Spaniards. Elizabeth I issued a medal quoting the Psalms, "God breathed with his winds, and they were scattered"; Philip of Spain said to the survivors: "I sent you forth to fight with men, not with the elements."

Shakespeare's Henry V makes it a capital offense to give credit for the victory of Agincourt to anyone but God. The French, whose opinion did not count, would have ascribed it rather to the bitch-goddess Fortune, and some even in

the English army—Fluellen, for example—might have agreed with them. But such dissenting voices have to be silenced as long as the excitement of the victory lasts. Similarly, while the battle was going on, it would have been highly injudicious to question the assumption that St. George was supporting the English or, on the other side, St. Denis the French, much less suggest that one saint originated in a pagan folk tale and the other in a pious fraud. Yet the first doubt at least might have been defensible theologically, even in the fifteenth century.

Greek critics distinguished verbal structures as true, false, and plastic, or more accurately plasmatic, the presenting of things as they conceivably could be. Truth and falsehood are not literary categories, and are only approximately even verbal ones. For the literary critic, at all events, everything in words is plasmatic, and truth and falsehood represent the directions or tendencies in which verbal structures go, or are thought to go. This leads to a general distinction between serious and responsible literature on the one hand, and the trifling and fantastic on the other. Again, these are not literary categories, or qualities inherent in literary works themselves. They are the primary elements of the social acceptance of or response to literature. Hence what is accepted as serious or dismissed as trifling may vary from one age to another, depending on currents of fashion or cultural attitudes operating for the most part outside literature.

The original criterion of truth is personal: a thing is true because a tradition of sufficient authority, or a person representing that tradition, says or endorses it. Here truth is identified, not so much with the verifiable statement, as with the "existential" statement of supreme importance for the community. This personal standard of truth is normally established under the social conditions of an oral

culture, and we notice how the great religious teachers tend to disclaim all connection with writing and confine themselves to the spoken word. Later on, truth tends to be thought of rather as truth of correspondence. A verbal structure describes something, and is called true if it is a satisfactory set of verbal symbols for what it describes. The development of writing throws a heavy emphasis on the descriptive aspect of words, and consequently a writing culture tends to identify truth more and more completely with truth of verbal correspondence.

In proportion as this more rational conception of truth develops, the fabulous acquires the quality of the imaginary, of something admitted not to be true. And because of the structural identity of fable and myth, the word myth, like the words fable and fiction, also takes on a connotation of "not really true." The New Testament uses the word *mythos* in this sense, and urges us to avoid *bebelous mythous*, profane stories. *Mythoi*, or just stories, were what other religions had: what Christians had were *logoi*, true stories. Confronted with this distinction, a literary critic can say only that the structural principles of the two appear to be identical. But if one story is true and another one of the same shape false, the difference between them can only be established by attaching a body of discursive writing to the true story, designed to verify or rationalize its truth.

The same point had struck Plato much earlier. It horrified Plato that the accredited teachers of religion in his day were poets employing myths instead of philosophers employing dialectic. Plato used myths himself a good deal, of course, as has been often enough said since his time. But there appear to be different levels of myth in Plato. On the highest level, myths are illustrations of principles established by dialectic, the instrument of knowledge about the

intelligible world. From that knowledge we move up to a myth showing this knowledge in a state of union, the wise man's untroubled vision of reality. We cannot enter into the great myths of creation, reincarnation, or the history of Atlantis which Socrates and Timaeus expound without a preliminary training in philosophy. Such myths are as far as possible removed from the obstacle myths or silly stories which offend our sense of reality and moral decorum, and yet have gained a special authority by tradition. Plutarch says that the gods of whom indecent stories can be told are no gods: it follows that such stories are not true myths. Thus Plato, if I am right about him, makes the distinction between myth and fable as wide as he can get, one being at the top and the other at the bottom of his vision of reality.

But for Plato knowledge about the intelligible world is also to be used for controlling the masses of people below it, who live by trust in authority. For them, whatever can be formulated as a doctrine, a history, a law, an argument, or a moral principle, and so belongs outside literature, can be illustrated by a story. The story is popular, addresses itself to untutored minds, and so helps to overcome the gap between the rulers who know and the ruled who must believe. The latter, if they do not know what truth is, may have to be lied to. But a myth on this lower level may be a lie and still represent true indoctrination, and true indoctrination is the real social function of literature. Much of what the poets give us, however, is lower-level myth without any relation to true indoctrination, still less to dialectic: this is part of the shadow-knowledge which has no function in Plato's republic.

Similarly, Christianity possessed a body of true myth or revelation, most of it in the Bible. This was distinguished from unauthorized myth by having a large body of con-

ceptual writing attached to it, the doctrinal system of Christian theology. As with Plato, the Christian has to pass through this doctrinal system before he can understand the myths of the Bible. In the nineteenth century Cardinal Newman remarked that the function of scripture was not to teach doctrine but to prove it: this axiom shows how completely the structure of the Bible had been translated into a conceptual system which both replaced and enclosed it. Even the fact that the original data were for the most part stories, as far as their structure is concerned, often came to be resented or even denied. Whatever resisted the translating operation had to be bracketed as a mystery of faith, into which it was as well not to look too closely.

When Christianity came to northern Europe, one of its first tasks was to destroy non-Christian mythology, along with the heroic poetry that could serve as a rallying point for a cultural tradition outside Christianity. Such poetry flourished with great persistence, and as late as 800 Alcuin could warn against listening to it, asking *Quid Hirielidus cum Christo?*—What has the northern hero Ingeld to do with Christ? He was paraphrasing St. Paul, but also echoing the protest of the conservative Athenians: "What has all this to do with Dionysus?" Alcuin spoke for the great majority of those who controlled the art of writing, and they saw to it that we today have only the most fragmentary knowledge of what must have been a very great oral tradition. In doing so they set up, for a new cycle of civilization, much the same model of social response to literature that Plato had used, and passed it on to us. The similarity between biblical myths and the fables of the heathen could be accounted for by the fact that the devil, like man, is a clever mimic.

The Platonic revolution, as transmitted through Chris-

tianity, has given us a hierarchy of verbal structures with four main levels in it. On top is the level of high myth, biblical or Platonic, which is not only not literary but cannot be really understood except by those who have passed beyond the need for literature. Next come the serious verbal structures, the nonliterary ones that tell the truth by correspondence about history, religion, ethics, or social life. Below this is the relatively serious literature that reflects their truths and communicates them to the populace in the more agreeable forms of story or rhetorical embellishment. This is the middle ground of myth, in Plato the level where poets may operate by writing hymns to the gods and encomia on virtuous men. Below this is the literature designed only to entertain or amuse, which is out of sight of truth, and should be avoided altogether by serious people.

There are two results of this situation, one positive and constructive, the other negative and obstructive. The positive result was only possible because the rigorously hard line of this attitude did not maintain itself. There were many mitigating factors, like Aristotle's more liberal conception of mimesis, and because of them literature did succeed in gaining a real place in the Christian social order. As its place was essentially secular, the imaginative standards came to be set by the fabulous writers, and the mythical ones had to meet those standards. They got no special advantage, except by accident, from choosing themes to which their society attached special importance. There is said to be an illustration in an early edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* showing the plays of John Dryden being advertised in Vanity Fair. Bunyan would certainly have thought that his theme, the imitation of Christ in the Christian life, gave his book, whatever its aesthetic merits, a fundamental seriousness that no play of Dryden's could

possibly match. Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, perhaps Matthew Arnold, would have agreed with the general principle, without being able to take Bunyan as seriously as Dryden within the category of literature itself. Samuel Johnson says that Pope's *Messiah* is greatly superior to Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, but that this is no credit to Pope, because Pope has derived his poem from an immeasurably superior source, the Book of Isaiah. This statement is nonsense as far as literary criticism is concerned, and Johnson knows that it is nonsense: he is making the statement simply to emphasize the priority of his religious commitments to his literary standards.

The negative results of the Platonic and Christian view, however, are more obvious and important for the subject of romance. Serious literature, according to that view, is addressed to those who have a natural hankering for pleasure, and really want to read just for fun, but can be persuaded to read for instruction as well. It is for this group, according to a principle generally accepted in Elizabethan times, that Classical mythology is intended. The fables of the gods are pleasant enough to entice the more light-minded reader, but when he digests them he will find that they are really wholesome food, that is, moral platitudes. Thus Adlington, in the preface to his translation of Apuleius:

And therefore the poets feigned not their fables in vain, considering that children in time of their first studies are very much allured thereby to proceed to more grave and deep studies . . . By the fable of Actaeon, where it is feigned that when he saw Diana washing herself in a well, he was immediately turned into an hart, and so was slain of his own dogs, may be meant, that when a man casteth his eyes on the vain and soon fading beauty of the world . . . he seemeth to be turned into a brute beast . . . The fall

of Icarus is an example to proud and arrogant persons, that weeneth to climb up to the heavens . . . By Phaeton, that unskillfully took in hand to rule the chariot of the sun, are represented those persons which attempt things passing their power and capacity.

We finally come, at the bottom of the hierarchy, to popular literature, or what people read without guidance from their betters. Popular literature has been the object of a constant bombardment of social anxieties for over two thousand years, and nearly the whole of the established critical tradition has stood out against it. The greater part of the reading and listening public has ignored the critics and censors for exactly the same length of time. This is an issue which we shall have to look into, because the bulk of popular literature consists of what I have been calling sentimental romance.

Any serious discussion of romance has to take into account its curiously proletarian status as a form generally disapproved of, in most ages, by the guardians of taste and learning, except when they use it for their own purposes. The close connection of the romantic and the popular runs all through literature. The formulas of New Comedy and Greek romance were demotic and popular formulas, like their counterparts now, treated with condescension by the highbrows, one form of condescension being the writing of such tales themselves, as academics write detective stories today. A similar situation, according to Arthur Waley, appeared in Classical China, which produced some excellent romances although romance was never accepted as a valid form of literature.

Popular literature, the guardians of taste feel, is designed only to entertain; consequently reading it is a waste of time. More closely regarded by anxiety, it turns

out to be something far worse than a waste of time. Romance in particular is, we say, "sensational": it likes violent stimulus, and the sources of that stimulus soon become clear to the shuddering censor. The central element of romance is a love story, and the exciting adventures are normally a foreplay leading up to a sexual union. Hence romance appears to be designed mainly to encourage irregular or excessive sexual activity. This may be masturbation, which is the usual model in the minds of those who speak with contempt of "escape" reading, or it may be a form of voyeurism. Most denunciations of popular romance on such grounds, we notice, assume that the pornographic and the erotic are the same thing: this overlooks the important principle that it is the function of pornography to stun and numb the reader, and the function of erotic writing to wake him up.

Throughout the history of culture, not many people have really questioned this Platonic and traditionally Christian framework. In every age it has been generally assumed that the function of serious literature is to produce illustrations of the higher truths conveyed by expository prose. The real social function of literature, in this view, is to persuade the emotions to align themselves with the reason, and so act on the "heart," which perhaps means not so much the pump in the chest as the primary or primitive brain. The disputes are mainly, not about the status of literature, but about how efficient the serious aspect of serious literature is in separating itself from the moral turpitude of mere entertainment.

Every so often a particularly bloody-minded censor denies that there is any separation. In Elizabethan times there was Stephen Gosson, an able and acute writer given his premises, who wrote *The School of Abuse* largely to attack the new threat that popular literature was posing in

the theater. Gosson demonstrates that Classical myths were not stories told for the sake of their morals: whether the morals are inserted by the poets themselves or by their readers, the stories in themselves are not instructive but delightful, and therefore detestable. An example of a more liberal view founded on similar premises is the implication in Judge Woolsey's court decision on *Ulysses*, which held that *Ulysses* was serious rather than obscene because its attitude to sex was more nauseating ("emetic") than enticing.

Many literary critics today still have Platonic minds, in the sense that they attach what for them are the real values of literature to something outside literature which literature reflects. This may be scholastic theology or Senecan ethics in one age, Marxist economics or Freudian psychology in another, sociolinguistics or phenomenology in another. Freudian and Marxist critics, of the more orthodox kinds at least, generally subscribe to the Platonic view of literature, and I have been amused to notice, in discussions of my own work, how my proposal to take literature itself as the area of critical investigation, without granting anything else priority to it, causes Freudian and Marxist anxieties to go up like barrage balloons.

In bourgeois society, a good deal of anxiety about popular literature has had a vestigial class motivation. Prohibition was clearly part of an effort to impose a middle-class ethic on a working class who might be alcoholically stimulated to do less work. Similarly, sexual prudery has often been a middle-class reaction to the fact that the pleasures of sex are available to ordinary people, and are therefore, as the proverbial lady says, "much too good for them." Phrases emphasizing the cheapness of popular literature, such as "dime novel," or "penny dreadful," lingered long after inflation had made them archaic, and it was a com-

mon assumption, sometimes reflected in legislation, that very expensive books were automatically serious. Such anxieties are no longer much with us, except sporadically, but some of the habits of mind they engendered still are, and account for much of our confusion today about the social function of the humanities. I am aware, of course, that popular literature of various types has recently come in for a good deal of academic processing. I am trying to suggest a literary perspective on it which may help to bring it into the area of literary criticism instead of confining it to linguistics or to the less fashionable suburbs of sociology.

There seem to me to be two ways of looking at popular literature. If by popular literature we mean what a great many people want or think they want to read when they are compelled to read, or stare at on television when they are not, then we are talking about a packaged commodity which an overproductive economy, whether capitalist or socialist, distributes as it distributes food and medicines, in varying degrees of adulteration. Much of it, in our society, is quite as prurient and brutal as its worst enemy could assert, not because it has to be, but because those who write and sell it think of their readers as a mob rather than a community. In such a social context the two chief elements of romance, love and adventure, become simply lust and bloodlust. As in most melodrama, there is often a certain self-righteous rationalization of the tone: this is what we're all involved in, whether we like it or not, etc. But the fact that sex and violence emerge whenever they get a chance does mean that sexuality and violence are central to romance: this is an important cultural fact about it which we shall have to return to.

Popular literature could also mean, however, the literature that demands the minimum of previous verbal experience and special education from the reader. In poetry, this

would include, say, the songs of Burns and Blake, the Lucy lyrics of Wordsworth, ballads and folksongs, and other simple forms ranging from some of the songs and sonnets of Shakespeare to Emily Dickinson. Much if not most of this would be very unpopular in the bestseller sense, but it is the kind of material that should be central in the literary education of children and others of limited contact with words. When we apply this conception of the popular to stories in prose, we find ourselves again close to folktale, and begin to understand more clearly what the real connection between romance and popular literature is.

The central mythical area is an area of special authority, which means that people in authority take it over. It becomes the center also of education, and the literature based on it thus becomes highly allusive and erudite, these qualities increasing as the mythology expands into other cultural areas. *Paradise Lost* is "elite" literature, if it is understood that I am not using the word in its cliché sense. It is elite not because it is biblical in its choice of subject, but because the whole structure of humanist learning, with biblical and Classical mythology radiating out from it, has to be brought to bear on the reading and study of the poem. By contrast, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is, or was, popular literature, because it assumes only the kind of understanding of the Christian myth that every English family with any books or education at all would have possessed in Bunyan's day and for two centuries thereafter. Pope's *Dunciad* is "elite" literature of a more secular kind, with its echoes from Classical epic and its dense texture of personal allusion and of what we call in-jokes. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is popular because it demands only the kind of awareness of the world that, again, an eighteenth-century Englishman likely to read any book would normally have.

If there is anything to be said for this conception of pop-

ular literature, we should be careful not to idealize it as a virtuous resistance to elitism, the poor but honest hero of bourgeois romance who triumphs over his wealthier rival. Popular literature, so defined, is neither better nor worse than elite literature, nor is it really a different kind of literature: it simply represents a different social development of it. The same writer may feel the pull of elite and popular tendencies within himself. The popular helps to diversify our literary experience and prevent any type of literary education from getting a monopoly of it; but as time goes on, popular writers without exception survive by being included in the literary "establishment." Thus Spenser has acquired a reputation as a poet's poet and a storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory; but in his day *The Faerie Queene* was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beautiful maidens and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following the more sober Classical models.

As a rule, popular literature in this sense indicates where the next literary developments are most likely to come from. It was the popular theater, not humanist neo-Classical drama, that pointed the way to Marlowe and Shakespeare; it was the popular Deloney, not the courtly and aristocratic Sidney, who showed what the major future forms of prose fiction were going to be like; it was the popular ballad and broadside and keepsake-book doggerel of the eighteenth century that anticipated the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Lyrical Ballads*. In prose, the popular literature signaling such new developments has usually taken the form of a rediscovery of the formulas of romance.

The history of literature seems to break down into a series of cultural periods of varying length, each dominated by certain conventions. During these periods, what one distinguished scholar of this university has called the

burden of the past increases rapidly in weight and oppressiveness. Writers improve and refine on their predecessors until it seems that no further improvement is possible. Then the conventions wear out, and literature enters a transitional phase where some of the burden of the past is thrown off and popular literature, with romance at its center, comes again into the foreground. This happened with Greek literature after New Comedy, when Greek romance emerged; it happened at the end of the eighteenth century in Britain, when the Gothic romances emerged, and it is happening now after the decline of realistic fiction, as I shall try to explain more fully in the next chapter.

We should note that, if we accept my second definition of popular, the words popular and primitive mean essentially the same thing, except that "popular" has its context in class structure and "primitive" in history. If we define popular literature as what ignorant and vicious people read, the prejudice implied will make it impossible to understand what is going on in literature. Similarly, if we define the primitive only as the chronologically early, we create an illusion of literature gradually improving itself from naked savagery to the decent clothing of accepted cultural values. But actually the primitive is a quality in literature which emerges recurrently as an aspect of the popular, and as indicating also that certain conventions have been exhausted. The Greek romancers, for all their coyness, are more primitive in this sense than Homer or Aeschylus; the Gothic romancers, like many of the poets contemporary with them, are primitive in a way that Pope and Swift are not, and so are the folk-singers and science-fiction writers of our own day as compared with Eliot or Joyce.

In every period of history certain ascendant values are accepted by society and are embodied in its serious literature. Usually this process includes some form of kidnapped

romance, that is, romance formulas used to reflect certain ascendant religious or social ideals. Spenser knew very well what he was doing with his ogres and dragons: he was trying to get imaginative support for the Protestant revolution of his time, both in its insurgent phase, the main subject of Book One of *The Faerie Queene*, and in its authoritarian phase, the main subject of Book Five. At other times popular enjoyment of sexuality or violence is simply gratified or exploited. But something forever excluded from accepted values always gets away, never wholly absorbed even by the greatest literature.

Of Borges' two retold stories, the biblical and the romantic, the biblical story finally ends with the Book of Revelation, in a fairytale atmosphere of gallant angels fighting dragons, a wicked witch, and a wonderful gingerbread city glittering with gold and jewels. But the other story, the ship searching the Mediterranean for a lost island, never seems to come to an end. It may go into the Atlantic looking for happy islands here, or into the Pacific, as in Melville's *Mardi*, or into outer space, journeying to planets so remote that light itself is too slow a vehicle. When we study the great classics of literature, from Homer on, we are following the dictates of common sense, as embodied in the author of Ecclesiastes: "Better is the sight of the eye than the wandering of desire." Great literature is what the eye can see: it is the genuine infinite as opposed to the phony infinite the endless adventures and endless sexual stimulation of the wandering of desire. But I have a notion that if the wandering of desire did not exist, great literature would not exist either.

There is a line of Pope's which exists in two versions: "A mighty maze of walks without a plan," and "A mighty maze, but not without a plan." The first version recognizes the human situation; the second refers to the constructs of

religion, art, and science that man throws up because he finds the recognition intolerable. Literature is an aspect of the human compulsion to create in the face of chaos. Romance, I think, is not only central to literature as a whole, but the area where we can see most clearly that the maze without a plan and the maze not without a plan are two aspects of the same thing.

Notes

Notes are keyed to page and line

- 3.19 "Apollonius story." For the Latin origin of this story, see Ben Edwin Perry, *The Ancient Romances* (1967), 300.
- 8.14 "George MacDonald." From an essay on Shakespeare called "St. George's Day, 1564."
- 8.34 "derived from myth." See A. D. Nock's critique of Karl Kerényi in *Gnomon* (1928), 485f.
- 10.33 "Bede." *Ecclesiastical History*, iv, 24. The quotation is from the translation of Leo Sherley-Price, in the Penguin Classics (1955), quoted by permission of Penguin Books.
- 17.11 "Greek critics." See Moses Hadas, *Hellenistic Culture* (1959), 121.
- 20.19 "Alcuin." See H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (1912), 41.
- 23.27 "Arthur Waley." See his preface to the translation of the *Chi in Ping Mei* in Capricorn Books, 1960.
- 29.1 "burden of the past." See W. Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970).
- 35.21 "Wallace Stevens." See particularly the first essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in *The Necessary Angel* (1951).
- 37.20 "Coleridge." *Biographia Literaria*, ch. xiii.
- 40.16 "Scott later called him." In a letter to J. B. S. Morritt, July 24, 1814; quoted from Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, ch. 27.
- 66.32 "Saga of Harold Hardradi." See *King Harald's Saga*, tr. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, Penguin Classics (1966), 129, quoted by permission of Penguin Books.
- 68.30 "Athene." *Odyssey*, xiii, 291-299. There are many transla-